

Captain John Paul Jellyfish Serialized



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Land Ho!

Day broke at last. Captain John Paul Jellyfish watched the stars blink out one by one. Before the North Star disappeared, he checked his bearings and determined that the fleet had retained its westerly course.

A blazing white disk rose from the sea behind the captain.

"A brand-new sun," he observed. "Again, I wonder where the new ones come from. Where did the old one go? So many mysteries in the world. So many things I need to know."

The first thing on the order of the day was morning inspection. During his rounds, John Paul heard the first mate dismiss the night watch and call up the morning crew. He watched the lieutenant lead a squad of hands through morning drills.

"I see slack in your jelly sac, sailor!" the yellow sea nettle barked. "Less wobble! Less wobble there! Don't let those tentacles droop, or I'll have the lot of you flogged!"

It was the regular routine of a jellyfish fleet at sea.

"Discipline and drill keep a sailor's mind away from mischief," John Paul assured himself.

Toward noon, the captain was wondering if this day would be like the others of swaying skies and pitching horizons, when the lookout cried, "Ahoy, Captain! *Flotsam* spotted off your *port* bow!"

Privately, John Paul was befuddled by these fancy sailing terms. Why, for instance, did seamen insist on saying *bow*, *stern*, *port*, and *starboard* when front, back, left, and right would serve the purpose just as well? And for the life of him, he could not remember what *flotsam* meant.

Fortunately, the first mate sang out, "I see it, Cap'n. A bit to your right-o. There's somethin' floatin' in the water-o."

John Paul saw it too. There, bobbing among the heaving waves, was a beer bottle.

"Lieutenant!" he cried. "Report to the crew that *flotsam* has been spotted, if you please. That bottle can mean only one thing. Land is near--land where people live and litter!"

Shortly afterward, a frigate bird glided over the fleet. Here was the first non-marine creature the jellies had seen in months, more proof that land was close. They let out a whoop as the bird swooped toward them.

"Avast there!" John Paul bellowed. "Cease that racket or the hungry creature will have you for lunch!"

All afternoon, the fleet sailed past other evidence that their journey was almost over--a patch of seaweed, a plastic spoon, a Styrofoam cup, and a light bulb.

"Smucker, take a sounding, if you please," John Paul ordered.

Smucker, a young mushroom jellyfish, dropped below and came up to report, "By the mark fifteen fathoms, Captain."

"Excellent," said John Paul. "We should sight land by sundown.

Sure enough, toward nightfall, the lookout gave the cry all the jellies longed to hear, "Laaaaaaaaaand ho-o-o-o-o-o!"

The captain peered northwestward. The horizon, which had been a wavy line for months, now appeared as a pink smudge.

Excitement welled up inside John Paul's jelly.

"Mr. Brown!" he barked. "Alter course! Ready about! Shift the rudder! Down helm! Hard alee and all that! We have crossed the Atlantic at last!"

As the fleet turned in unison, the First Mate led the cry, "Three cheers for the Cap'n-o! Hip! Hip!"

"Hurrah!" sang the entire crew.

"Hip! Hip!"

"Hurrah!"

"Stow it, Mr. Brown," the captain broke in. "Kindly return to your station."

At the moment, John Paul felt anything but a hero. While regarding the approaching coastline, a ripple of fear ran from his red-freckled sac to the tip of his tentacles. In the twilight, he could make out the silhouettes of tall buildings, church steeples, and factory chimneys. As they sailed closer in, gleaming storefronts, cross-crosses of streets, and rows of houses came into focus. Still nearer to shore, he spotted swarms of cars creeping along a freeway.

"Well, this isn't India," John Paul admitted. "This must be an entirely new world, some uncharted land. I've discovered *something*. But I wonder what on earth it is."

